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# **EDITORS' INTRODUCTION: WHY REPEAT VICTIMIZATION MATTERS**

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The basic facts of repeat victimization are well known. Substantial proportions of differences in rates of crime are attributable to differences in their concentration on particular targets, whether those targets are defined in terms of people, organizations or households. Four of the chapters in this collection detail the extent and correlates of such rates in continental Europe and worldwide (by Farrell and Bouloukos, van Dijk, Kleemans, and Mawby). As is evident from these chapters and from other publications, establishing precise levels of repeats is by no means easy. While problems with police data on recorded crime are well-recognized, victimization surveys also have attendant difficulties. Once this is acknowledged and set aside, whether a level of repeats is high or low depends upon the prevalence of crime. Low levels of repeats will be important in countries or regions of low crime prevalence. High levels of repetition will always be important, but less remarkable where high crime-prevalence is found.

The extent of repeat victimization necessarily means that a substantial reduction in rates of crime is potentially achievable by reductions in the extent of repetition. Some successes in this regard have been achieved, for example, concerning burglary and domestic violence (Hanmer et al., 1998; Forrester et al., 1988). Success has come by preventing repeats. The Morgan contribution to this volume offers an elegant analysis of area differences in the reasons for repeat victimization. His use of survival analysis is original, and certainly represents an advance.

Some prevention potential may also be realized by *detecting* those responsible for repeats, especially if they are disproportionately the work of prolific offenders, as Everson and Pease contend in this volume. The Clarke et al. chapter in this volume reminds us that there is much remaining to be understood about the perpetrators of repeats, but a body of work is now emerging that suggests that the bulk of repeated crime is attributable to the same offenders, and that they tend to be prolific (see Ashton et al., 1998). DNA scene-to-scene matches provide a fine method of establishing this beyond doubt.

The implications of the proposition that prolific offenders commit repeat crimes against the same target could scarcely be overstated. This would mean that offender targeting could be achieved by the elegant means of "baiting" previously victimized places and people (always with victim consent, obviously) to detect the offenses distinctive to prolific offenders, rather than the resource-intensive (and civil-rights threatening) targeting of the offenders themselves. England and Wales are currently undertaking an ambitious enterprise to capture DNA samples from the criminally active population, and from all scenes of crimes liable to yield DNA traces. Because police officers require training for this to happen, and because DNA tracing from crime scenes is expensive (requiring elimination samples from those entitled to be where the crime took place), the process cannot be swift. Which crime scenes should have priority during the period before all crime scenes are tested? One possibility would be to prioritize repeat victimization. As Oscar Wilde wrote in Act 1 of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, "To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness."

The specter of victim blame hangs over the literature on repeat victimization. In this collection, Titus and Gover properly contend that victim greed begets victimization by fraud. The notion of victim careers in the Farrell et al. proposal as to the direction of future research likewise envisions the possibility of stable personal attributes associated with chronic victimization over long periods. In an as yet unpublished work by Paul Wiles and Andrew Costello, recent contact with the police as an offender is predictive of repeat victimization. Will programs to prevent repeat victimization inevitably be tainted by accusations of victim blame? They probably will. There are delicate judgments to be made about the propriety of inviting victims to change their behavior. It is clearly indefensible to ask women to dress drably to avoid repeat sexual attack, or victims of domestic violence to defer to their aggressors. Is it indefensible to ask victims of burglary to upgrade their security? Sometimes it is, where such upgrading would be financially onerous. Sometimes it is not. Repeat victimization identifies those at risk. It tells one where the problem is.

What one does about that risk is a matter for sensitive, case-by-case scrutiny. The detection approach mooted above does not suffer from these problems; conventional approaches do. To paraphrase Pease's (1998) suggestions:

- Offenders choose victims because of attributes of their possessions, location or selves. Protection of victims in their lives as they choose to live them should be offered, but there seems no reason in principle why the factors believed to render them vulnerable should not be mentioned, so long as this is separated from any offer of help. Victims may choose to change, and have the right to the best possible information on which to base that choice. Help should not be contingent on that choice.
- A special case may exist in which the commercial decision to tolerate a high level of repeat victimization has the consequence of reducing the level of police service available to others. In such cases, it may be acceptable to offer lower levels of service to the business in question.
- Some people who present themselves as victims, e.g., as insurance fraudsters or colluders with offenders, are in truth blameworthy. Repeat victimization approaches do not preclude reconsideration of victim status.

### **"HOT DOTS AND HOT SPOTS"**

In the Farrell and Sousa chapter, the linkage between hot spots and repeat victimization is rehearsed.

The repeat victim is the most precise hot spot — the "hot dot" (Pease and Laycock, 1996). There will be circumstances in which conventional hot-spot analysis is more fruitful, others where it is not possible (as where police departments have inadequate mapping systems or data that make hot-spot analysis difficult). The worst situation would be where hot-spot and repeat victimization were regarded as rivals. The same places are identified by both phenomena. Johnson et al. (1997) show that hot spots are characterized by high levels of repeat victimization. Bennett (1995) shows that just over one third of domestic burglaries within hot spots are parts of a series. The right question must concern the kind of analysis that best informs targeted crime prevention practice in a particular area. Some ways of addressing this issue are suggested by Pease (1998).

## WHAT NEXT?

In England and Wales (and, to some extent, Scotland), repeat victimization has entered the mainstream of crime prevention discourse. The danger now is of it becoming a cliché, unsupported by a research agenda and intelligent developments in practice. Contacts made during the U.K. government's current crime reduction program make it clear that there is a great danger of this happening. The chapter by Shaw reminds us of what is at stake in preventing this, namely, large amounts of chronic human misery. The chapter by Farrell et al. sets out one research agenda. The further exploration of what is distinctive about those who chronically offend against the same targets is also a research priority. There is much mileage left in repeat victimization as a topic of criminological interest and crime control attention. It can add momentum to the victims' movement. It is not inconceivable that a new wave of victim-oriented policing could result.



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